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Evolving Questions and Comparative Perspectives in Cultural/Historical Research

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Dr. Edwards received her doctoral degree in human development through an integrated training program (at Harvard University) that involved study and research contact with professors or education, anthropology, and psychology. Her teaching and research career has involved positions (at Vassar College and the Universities of Massachusetts, Kentucky, and Nebraska) in departments or psychology, education, and family and consumer sciences.

Abstract

In studying human development in cultural-historical context, we must integrate multiple levels of analysis and strive to identify culture's imprint inside the contexts of socialization. Issues of methodology are complex. This paper argues that both comparative and historical-interpretive studies are valuable and indeed generative for each other, using as an example an international, collaborative research project focused on East African women and changing child-rearing values. The site was Ngecha, a Gikuyu-speaking community in the Central Province of Kenya, during a period of rapid social change from an agrarian to a wage-earning economy shortly after national independence (1968–1973). The experiences of Ngecha women highlighted their significant role as agents of social change in the village and stimulated the team to transform an ahistorical comparative investigation into a multifaceted case study with a strong historical component.

Keywords: Cultural/historical context, International research, Kenya, Socialization, Women and economic development

Culture is everywhere that human beings are, and implicated in everything we do. Instantiated in everyday life and normative practices, culture involves shared, learned schemas and patterns of thought, beliefs, and values. Culture cannot be studied as a separate and distinct source of statistical variance or modeled as an independent influence on human development with its own separate pathways. Neither can it be represented diagrammatically as "outside" other systems—"around," "beyond," or "behind" the main socializing events and learning environments of family, peer group, school, and neighborhood in which children and families participate.

Culture is too often treated as a "packaged variable" by social scientists who see it as a nebulous but all pervasive explanation for variance left over and unexplained by age, gender, occupation, education, or other individual-level variables, and simply packaged as a black box called "ethnicity x" or "culture y" [Weisner and Edwards, 2002; Whiting, 1976]. In studying development, we should always work to integrate multiple levels of analysis and strive for a sophisticated understanding of how to identify the imprint of culture inside developmental contexts. We must become fleet of foot in pursuing complex questions about fluid, dynamic, rapidly shifting cultural/historical phenomena.

But how best to do so? Certainly in recent years, developmental scientists as a group have made impressive progress in recognizing that culturally particular human relationships are the medium in which child development takes place and in finding new ways to talk about, describe, analyze, and understand the cultural/historical aspects of childhood socialization in context. Barbara Rogoff, in her opening statement for this special issue, calls for research programs that include historical and interpretive studies of holistic configurations of change at the community level.

In this paper, I will argue why both of two kinds of research are necessary and generative for the other: the familiar, trustworthy platform of comparative research that uses statistical differences between groups as the starting point for understanding cultural processes, and a new locus on changes over time in community organizations, institutions, and child-rearing practices. I provide an example from my own long-term, collaborative work, based on an interdisciplinary model created by international colleagues who are grounded and prepared in both psychological and anthropological disciplines. The example reveals how an ahistorical comparative study evolved through its own scientific and intellectual momentum to eventually emerge as a case study with a strong historical component. The experience suggests why researchers today have to go about their work with a general readiness and openness to alternative perspectives on how to conduct research as they seek to get a grip on that most elusive and immensely complex of constructs: cultural/historical context.

The study involves East African women and their changing values about child-rearing. An edited volume with contributions by Kenyans and Americans [Whiting and Edwards, 2003, in press] looks at Ngecha, a Gikuyu-speaking community in the Central Province of Kenya, undergoing rapid social change from an agrarian to a wage-earning economy and beginning to emerge as a new Nairobi suburb during a 5-year period shortly after national independence, 1965–1973. This volume came about as a result of a long-term, multi-site research project, Child Development Research Unit, based at Nairobi University, to forward the goals of comparative cultural investigation. The periurban community of Ngecha was one of the focal (panel) communities for the comparative project and close to project

headquarters, and so became the focus of an exceptionally rich body of observations, interviews, and description in empirical studies.

The comparative analyses of observational data led to findings about the role of social experience and social environments in eliciting and shaping the behavior of Ngecha infants, children, and adolescents. For example, Whiting and Edwards [1988] presented the behavior observations of Ngecha children in comparison with those of children from other communities in Kenya and around the world [see Whiting, de Guzman, & Edwards, 2002]. The data showed how children's age, gender, social partners, and activity settings related to their social interaction. In most communities, girls participated more heavily than boys in household and subsistence tasks, and at a younger age. Children (whether boys or girls) who had more responsibility in caring for younger children and higher task involvement developed habits of responsive nurturance. In those communities where children attended school and had frequent opportunity to play in groups of same-age peers, children showed relatively higher levels of dominant, competitive, and playful aggressive behavior, suggesting that the introduction of schooling has led to changes in children's social as well as cognitive behavior. Other studies arising from the Ngecha project focused on infants [Leiderman et al., 1973; Leiderman and Leiderman, 1977], toddlers [Edwards and Whiting, 1993], and adolescents and transition to adulthood [Worthman and Whiting, 1987].

The next step involved turning attention to the range of experiences of Ngecha women, and it was here that the effects of rapid social change were so striking that they clearly became the foreground [Whiting, 1977, 1984; Whiting and Edwards, 2003]. New technologies and educational and economic opportunities invited the village women in particular to extend their managerial and problem-solving skills, originally developed while growing up in large families and doing responsible work as children, into new realms. The mothers' particular "training" style of interacting with their children [Whiting and Edwards, 1988] was high in prosocial task assignment and low in sociability and information exchange. However, it could be changed to encompass new goals, including basic ways of supporting their children's schoolwork by seeing that children got to school and that they had time to do their homework.

In addition to creating opportunities, the market and wage economy also created concomitants such as increasing isolation of nuclear families, shifting roles for men and women, and weakening ties to the extended family, that increased the burdens and constraints on Ngecha mothers. These changes transformed the decisions to be made by young adults and the aged as well. In my extended interviews at Nairobi University, Gikuyu-speaking women articulated such themes as: educated women's responsibilities to the family; autonomous control of their own money; conflict between the self's aspirations and demands of parents; relations with aging family members; changing structure of Kenyan family life and material relationships; and the tensions between European and African familial and religious values.

As mothers of young children, Ngecha women took on the role of agents of social change as they experienced the various technological innovations and adjusted to the requisite modifications in their daily routines and living arrangements. All over Africa, women have been critical players in responding to changing resource conditions and shaping new economic adaptations and family life styles [Stamp, 1995]. Prior litera-

ture has documented African women's agency in economic realms, but it has not always made clear their influence in their roles as mothers. Women in Ngecha emerged as central protagonists setting the future agenda of their country by preparing the children for wage earning jobs that required schooling. They rearranged their own value priorities and altered their aspirations for their children's educational and occupational outcomes [Whiting, 1996], and this led to conflicts between new and traditional values. They also displayed a new resourcefulness in facing opportunities to make money through cash cropping and other entrepreneurial activities, going to secondary school and technical training, and making contact with the new national politics and culture. Able to take risks and innovate, these women were path breakers in family adaptation.

The findings show how the change process impacted the daily lives of women and children and was seen through the eyes of the women who were important actors in the process. The women's experiences document the kaleidoscopic nature of culture change and indicate how a change in one aspect leads to unplanned consequences in another set of cultural practices, beliefs, and values.

How and why did this historical case study emerge out of a research study that began as part of a comparative social science investigation? The original goal was to define the critical cultural dimensions that explain important normative characteristics of adult and child behavior, and to search for independent variables at the cultural level (dimensions such as the roles and settings that children occupy, company they keep, and activities they perform) that are most powerful for explaining parent and child behavior around the world.

But as the work continued, the particular context (time and place in which the Ngecha study was conducted) came prominently to the fore. Of course, every society undergoes change over time, but the period following independence in 1963 was a time of especially rapid transformation for Kenya. Seeking to make sense of the behavioral observations and interviews from 1968 to 1973, it became necessary to look more deeply into the history of the Ngecha region as a source of insight and as a baseline, to focus our attention on domains of daily life that were changing most drastically. We could attempt to identify the catalysts for change and the strategies adopted to meet the challenges.

Furthermore, at the same time, new questions were raised for us by the unfolding stories of our Kenyan research collaborators, with whom enduring relationships were established. Beatrice Whiting notes that between 1968 and 1980, she had the opportunity to get to know closely 14 Kenyan students—members of the research project—who went on to become professional career women. They became successful lawyers, university professors and administrators, professionals in government, and several are now senior executives at international organizations. Involvement with these leading women raised questions such as these: What in their experience and training facilitated their impressive adjustment to the urban, capitalistic society of the new nation of Kenya and made it possible for them to adjust with seeming ease to international settings such as graduate school in the United States and United Kingdom? How different were these women from their mothers and grandmothers? How did rural women in Ngecha cope and adapt to their rapidly changing environment, taking into account the needs of their children, husbands, aging parents, and others for whom they were responsible?

As we struggled to interpret the data and findings, our interests evolved from the search for universal dimensions to analyzing and understanding how women coming out

of rural villages such as Ngecha were able to become successful not only in their local society but also in wider arenas (even international society). Primarily a story of resourcefulness and dignity in the face of challenge and opportunity, the portrait of Ngecha seems to serve as a microcosm of changes taking place throughout Kenya during a fascinating moment, and a description of what came to the village along with schooling, urban centers, markets, wage economy, land and population pressure, and new technologies.

Reflecting on the evolution of this project allows us to understand how contextual sensitivity involves attention to time as well as place, and the particular as well as the universal. It seems fitting that international and comparative research projects, requiring as they do such an enormous investment of energy, resources, and effort, should also have extraordinary yield not only in what they teach us about human behavior but also about methodology in cultural studies.

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